From Sterne to Dostoevsky (and back)

Godioli, Alberto

Published in:
Pirandello Studies

Publication date:
2015

FROM STERNE TO DOSTOEVSKY (AND BACK): CONFLICT AND REGRESSION IN PIRANDELLO'S SHORT STORIES

Alberto Godioli

DEFENCE MECHANISMS

In his influential essay 'Form and Chance: The German Novella' (2002), Andreas Gailus described the typical narrative structure of nineteenth- and twentieth-century short fiction as a conflict between a social or psychic 'system' and a 'foreign body', that's to say an 'excessive and traumatic element' that threatens the peace of the system.[1] The basic question underlying this pattern is: 'Will the system succeed in coping with the irritation, through defence, integration, or the reorganization of its own structure; or will the irritation instead overwhelm the system?'[2] To some extent, this structure is present in all kinds of fiction, but it is all the more evident in novellas and short stories; and indeed, Pirandello's *novelle* are a perfect case in point, especially when it comes to coping strategies and defence mechanisms being adopted by the individual to protect its psychic 'system' from the conflicts and possible traumas that usually come with life itself.

Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno* contain, in fact, several examples of what psychoanalysis designates as 'defence mechanisms'. For instance, 'La rosa', 'Canta l'Epistola', and 'Pena di vivere così', among many others, focus on paradigmatic cases of *asceticism*, i.e. 'eliminating the pleasurable effects of experiences' as a way to obtain gratification from renunciation; 'Pallottoline!', 'Rimedio: la geografia' and 'Quando s'è capito il giuoco', to mention but a few, variously exemplify the process known as *intellectualisation* or *flight into reason* ('excessively using intellectual processes to avoid affective expression or experience'), while 'Paura d'esser felice'—whose protagonist fantasizes about swallowing his own fate—perfectly encapsulates the notion of *introjection* ('introjection of a feared object serves to avoid anxiety when the aggressive characteristics of the object are internalised, thus placing the aggression under one's own control').[3] Even more clearly, as will be illustrated in the next few pages, many of Pirandello's short stories seem to be centred on *regression*, that is to say 'a return to an earlier phase of functioning, to avoid the conflict evoked at the present level of development'.[4]

To be sure, the notion of defence mechanism has already been used (however sporadically) as a key to interpreting Pirandello's works. As early as 1958, the *Rivista di Psicoanalisi* featured a short article by Giorgio Resta titled 'Meccanismi di difesa in Pirandello', focussing exclusively on *Il giuoco delle parti*;[5] while a few decades later, in *Pirandello, la follia* (1983), Elio Gioanola pointed out that the whole of Pirandello's production can be regarded as a 'huge

defence system built against the fear of madness'—or more generally, against life's conflicts and traumas.[6] That being said, this interpretive path is still largely unexplored, especially with regard to Pirandello's dialogue with other authors interested in how human beings tend to shield themselves from conflict. The present paper will only discuss one specific defence mechanism, namely regression; building on a series of previously unnoticed echoes from such diverging models as Sterne and Dostoevsky, it will aim to outline the ambiguous role of this psychic defence in Pirandello's poetics.

UNCLE TOBY, MARCO LECCIO, AND SPATOLINO

Among the many examples of regressive behaviour in the *Novelle per un anno*, it may be useful to start with a seemingly minor text, such as 'Frammento di cronaca di Marco Leccio e della sua guerra su carta nel tempo della grande guerra europea' (*Na* III, 1161–215), written around 1916–1917 (cf. *Na* III, 1470). Its protagonist is a former Red Shirt, yearning to join his son at the front of World War I; after offering himself as a volunteer, and after being rejected due to age limits, he locks himself in his room and indulges in the childish pastime of fighting a paper war on his maps, in the company of another veteran:

> Il 21 luglio, anniversario della battaglia di Bezzecca, Marco Leccio s'era chiuso nello studio […]. Là nello studio col reduce Tiralli, curvo ora su

> questa ora su quella carta geografica, irta di bandierine [...]. (*Na* III, 1173–75)[7]

This regression into puerile conduct is a clear (if generally overlooked) borrowing from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, namely from Uncle Toby's habit of reproducing famous battles basing on military maps, with the help of his assistant Trim:

> When my uncle Toby got his map of *Namur* to his mind, he began immediately to apply himself, and with the utmost diligence, to the study of it […]. In a fortnight's close and painful application, […] he was right eloquent upon it, and could make not only the attack of the advanced counterscarp with great order;—but having, by that time, gone much deeper into the art, than what his first motive made necessary, my uncle Toby was able to cross the *Maes* and *Sambre*; make diversions as far as *Vauban*'s line, the abbey of Salsines, &c. and give his visitors as distinct a history of each of their attacks, as of that of the gate of *St. Nicolas*, where he had the honour to receive his wound.[8]

A paper war is also mentioned in 'Berecche e la guerra' (*Na* III, 573–622; pp. 582–87), a text closely linked to 'Frammento'; in the latter story, however, Sterne's influence is far more pervasive. The protagonist's 'sciatica' (*Na* III, 1173), for instance, clearly evokes the pains endured by Tristram's father.[9]

Besides, and more significantly, ‘Frammento di cronaca’ features an identical reproduction of Sterne’s anecdote on the ‘ancient Goths of Germany’ debating everything twice, once drunk and once sober:

> Si dice, dunque, che gli antichi Goti avevano il saggio costume di discutere due volte ogni impresa da tentare: una prima volta, ubriachi, e la seconda volta a digiuno. Ubriachi, perché ai loro consigli non mancasse ardimento; a digiuno, perché non mancasse prudenza. (*Na* III, 1188)

> The ancient Goths of Germany […] had all of them a wise custom of debating every thing of importance to their state, twice, that is, — once drunk, and once sober:—Drunk—that their councils might not want vigour;—and sober—that they might not want discretion. (*Tristram Shandy*, p. 305)

On the other hand, Pirandello’s handling of regression is quite different from Sterne’s; in fact, while Uncle Toby’s hobby horse is just an innocuous (and ultimately healthy) pastime, Marco Leccio’s obsession with his paper war visibly verges on pathology. As we are told by the narrator, Leccio’s pastime is a neurotic defence against the trauma he is experiencing, that is to say his son’s departure for the front:

> [...] staccarsi dal figlio non sapeva neppure [...] non soffriva per altro. [...] soldato come il suo Giacomino [...], ecco quello che avrebbe voluto essere lui; e non ha potuto! (*Na* III, 1179 and 1190).[10]

In other words, the Sternian features of Marco Leccio's regression are counterbalanced by the author's emphasis on the pathetic and pathological aspect of his behaviour.

An even more evident example of this fundamental ambiguity can be found in another short story, 'Il Tabernacolo' (1903; *Na* I, 94–108), whose protagonist Spatolino has a habit of whistling whenever something disturbing comes to his mind:

> si mise a fischiettare, com'era solito ogni qual volta un dubbio o un pensiero lo rodevano dentro: – *Fififì… fififì… fififì…*' (*Na*, I 94)[11]

This regressive pattern also leads us back to Uncle Toby, and more precisely to his *Argumentum Fistolatorium*, i.e. his routine of whistling 'half a dozen bars of Lillebullero' when 'anything shocked or surprised him':

> My uncle Toby would never offer to answer this by any other kind of argument, than that of whistling half a dozen bars of Lillebullero.—You must know it was the usual channel thro' which his passions got vent, when any thing shocked or surprized him:—but especially when any thing,

> which he deem'd very absurd, was offered […]. I do, therefore, by these presents, strictly order and command, That it be known and distinguished by the name and title of the Argumentum Fistulatorium, and no other. (*Tristram Shandy*, pp. 56–57)

Once again, Uncle Toby becomes a model for regressive behaviour as a defence from possible conflicts (such as Spatolino's struggle to get paid for his *tabernacolo*); yet, once again, the playful and serene features of Sterne's character are turned into something more grotesque and pathetic at the same time. In the final scene of the story, Spatolino is standing in his shrine, wearing a crown of thorns and being martyrized by collective mockery; nonetheless, he keeps whistling like a child:

> Spatolino si scosta dalla fronte la corona di spine, a cui già s'è abituato, e—grattandosi lì, dove le spine gli han lasciato il segno—, con gli occhi invagati, si rimette a fischiettare: – *Fififì… Fififì… Fififì…* (*Na* I, 106)[12]

BETWEEN STERNE AND DOSTOEVSKY

To sum up, Sterne's light-hearted take on regression is both evoked and altered by Pirandello in a grotesque-pathetic direction. A reverse and somewhat complementary operation characterizes, instead, his handling of the

Dostoevskian paradigm. This point is best exemplified by a later short story such as ‘La tartaruga’ (1936; Na III, 744–52), whose protagonist Myshkow is a grown-up man living in a distressing family environment; as suggested by his ‘occhi bambinissimi’ [‘puerile eyes’] and his ‘inguaribile giovanilità’ [‘incurable juvenility’] (*Na* III, 745–46), he copes with the violence of his family life by way of regressing to childhood. Myshkow’s childish innocence is partly modelled on that of Myshkin, the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*—the strong similarity between their names is no coincidence in this respect. Myshkin’s childish features actually run as a leitmotif in *The Idiot*; on several occasions, the prince himself quotes his doctor on his being ‘a complete child’.[13] At the same time, there is also a clear difference between Pirandello’s and Dostoevsky’s characters: Myshkin’s puerile traits are a fragile pathological defence against the violence of reality, by which he will eventually be overcome; Myshkow’s oddity in ‘La tartaruga’, instead, is far less catastrophic— at the end of the story, he actually fulfils his dream of escaping from his family and being left alone with his turtle.

Contrary to what happened in ‘Marco Leccio’ and ‘Il tabernacolo’, the main character here is modelled on a paradigm of pathological regression, such as Myshkin, which is then revisited in a relatively light-hearted perspective; indeed, Sterne and Dostoevsky seem to represent the opposite poles in Pirandello’s continuous fluctuation between a playful and a pathological idea of regression. An emblematic intersection between these two literary models is

embodied by the character of Perazzetti, the protagonist of 'Non è una cosa seria' (1910; *Na* III, 123–31), who shields himself from the conflicts and responsibilities of adult life by taking a regressive attitude towards marriage—as illustrated by his farcical wedding with Filomena, the laughing-stock of the town, in order to protect himself from the risks of actual marriage. On the one hand, Perazzetti's mock wedding clearly echoes a famous episode from Dostoevsky's *Demons*, in which Stavrogin marries the half-crazy Maria Lebiadkina just for a laugh, as an eccentric fancy.[14] Yet, while Stavrogin's regression is part of a clearly neurotic and self-destructive personality, the disturbing aspects of Perazzetti's behaviour are counterbalanced by the lighter, Sternian features of his personality. Not by chance, the other story featuring Perazzetti as a main character ('Zuccarello distinto melodista', 1914) starts on a clearly Sternian note, as the dialogue between Perazzetti and his friends is rendered through the use of braces to indicate the overlapping of different voices—a device which is actually quite frequent in *Tristram Shandy*:

> - Ero, - cominciò a dire, guardandosi al solito le unghie, - ero, amici miei, in uno di quei momenti, purtroppo non rari, in cui la ragione (ne ho, per disgrazia, ancora un poco), sicura d'aver raggiunto alla fine quell'«assoluto» che tutti affannosamente, senza saperlo, andiamo cercando nella vita…

- Io, no,
- Io, no,
- Io, no,

} Io interrompemmo a coro.

Bestie, se vi dico *senza saperlo*! (*Na* III, 512)[15]

God bless
Duce take

} 'em all—said my uncle Toby and my father,
each to himself. [*Tristram Shandy*, 256]

Just heaven!

{ What masticators!——
What bread!—— [*Tristram Shandy*, 440]

And accordingly the abbess, giving the pitch note, set off thus:

Abbess,
Margarita,

} Bou – – bou – – bou – –
——ger, – – ger, – – ger

Margarita,
Abbess,

} Fou – – fou – – fou – –
——ter, – – ter, – – ter. [*Tristram Shandy*, 459]

Is Amandus
Is my Amanda

} still alive?
[*Tristram Shandy*, 463]

Once again, Pirandello's multi-layered intertextuality reflects a fluctuation between a Dostoevskian view of regression as anti-social pathology, and a Sternian framing of the same kind of behaviour as a joyous and healthy practice.

AN OIL JAR AND A CROCODILE

Nevertheless, within a corpus as vast as Pirandello's *Novelle* there is also room for exceptions, that is to say stories in which regression is seen in an entirely positive way. A fine case in point is 'La giara' (1909; *Na* III, 5–15), where Zi' Dima famously wins his battle against Don Lollò by turning conflict into a childish game; more precisely, his tactics exemplify the process known in psychoanalysis as ARISE (*Adaptive Regression in the Service of the Ego*), whereby 'the ego regresses partially in a controlled way, with some strategic aim'.[16] Strangely enough, this specimen of healthy and functional regression bears a striking resemblance to a short story by Dostoevsky—actually one of the few cases in which Dostoevsky does not seem to take regression too seriously. First of all, let us take a closer look at the plot of both stories. In 'La giara', Zi' Dima gets trapped in the jar he was supposed to repair; don Lollò understands that the only way to free him would be by breaking the jar, but will not allow that without a full refund from Dima. In response to that, Dima decides to set up home in the container, and to lead a normal life within it. The very same pattern can be found in Dostoevsky's 'The crocodile' (1865), where Ivan Matveitch is accidentally swallowed alive by a crocodile at an exhibition; as a consequence, the only way to set him free is by cutting the crocodile open, which the owner (referred to as 'the German') refuses to do without a full refund. While Ivan 'makes himself comfortable' in the belly of the crocodile, a friend of his even consults a lawyer, as don Lollò does in Pirandello's text—and in both cases, the attorney's opinion sounds absurdly pedantic:

> ‘I think you told me that he made himself fairly comfortable there? […] As for the German, it’s my personal opinion that he is within his rights, and even more so than the other side, because it was the other party who got into his crocodile without asking permission […]; and a crocodile is private property, and so it is impossible to slit him open without compensation’.[17]

> L’avvocato allora gli spiegò che erano due casi. Da un canto, lui, Don Lollò, doveva subito liberare il prigioniero per non rispondere di sequestro di persona; dall’altro il conciabrocche doveva rispondere del danno che veniva a cagionare con la sua imperizia o con la sua storditaggine. (*Na* III, 12)[18]

As also happens in ‘La giara’, incidentally, the main event is defined as a ‘caso nuovo’, an unusual accident that even lawyers have trouble solving: ‘It is a very unusual accident in itself […]. It is a suspicious accident, quite unheard of. Unheard of, above all; there is no precedent for it’ (‘The Crocodile’, pp. 174–76); ‘Caso nuovo, caro mio, che deve risolvere l’avvocato!’ (*Na* III, 11).

‘La Giara’, however, is indeed a rather isolated case; Pirandello’s perspective is usually far more ambiguous, and implies a ceaseless fluctuation between regression as paradoxical form of wisdom, and regression as a

pathological reaction to conflict. This ambiguity, after all, applies more generally to Pirandello's attitude towards all sorts of defence mechanism, from asceticism to intellectualisation—from one point of view, they are depicted as the only possible remedy against the conflicts and traumas that come with life; from the other, they imply a radical detachment from the norms of social life, and seem disturbingly close to madness, isolation, and ultimately to suicide (not by chance, suicide is another ubiquitous and paradoxical defence mechanism in Pirandello's short stories). This broader ambivalence, in turn, is closely related to what can be described as Pirandello's double bind towards the *forme* of civilization, which can be summarized as follows: on the one hand, escaping the rules and conventions (as well as the conflicts) of civilized life may be the only way to make life bearable; on the other hand, we cannot but fear that what lies beyond the *forme* is not a better way of living, but something akin to death and madness.[19] For Pirandello, the most effective way to deal with this fundamental duplicity is represented by a constant state of 'perplessità tra il pianto e il riso' ['perplexity between tears and laughter'] (*Si*, p. 907); or, in other words, by the symmetrical logic of *umorismo*.

University of Edinburgh

1 The *Unterhaltungen* dramatize the disturbance of a system by a foreign body. […] More specifically, what novellas, from Goethe to Musil, repeatedly attempt to represent is a dysfunctional and asymbolic core at

the heart of a functioning system, an excessive and traumatic element that threatens the unity of an organized whole from *within*' (A. Gailus, 'Form and Chance: The German Novella', in *The Novel,* edited by F. Moretti, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 739).

2 Gailus, 'Form and Chance', p. 740.

3 See respectively *Na* III, 448–70 ('La rosa'); *Na* I, 482–90 ('Canta l'Epistola'); *Na* II, 205–65 ('Pena di vivere così'); *Na* III, 185–95 ('Pallottoline!'); *Na* I, 205–13 ('Rimedio: la geografia'); *Na* III, 709–18 ('Quando s'è capito il giuoco'); *Na* II, 697–705 ('Paura d'esser felice').

4 The definitions for the defence mechanisms mentioned above are taken from B. Sadock and V. Sadock, eds, *Kaplan & Sadock's Synopsis of Psychiatry* (Philadelphia, Wolters Kluwer, 2007), pp. 202–03.

5 G. Resta, 'Meccanismi di difesa in Pirandello', *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, 2 (1958), 31–37.

6 'Un gigantesco sistema di difese eretto contro la paura della follia vera' (E. Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia* (Genoa, Il Melangolo, 1983), p. 119).

7 'On the 21st of July, the anniversary of the battle of Bezzecca, Marco Leccio locked himself in his room […]. There in his study with his old comrade Tiralli, bending here and there over his maps, all of which were covered with small flags [...]'. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Pirandello's texts are my own.

8 L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008) [henceforth abbreviated in text as *Tristram Shandy*], pp. 73–74. The Sternian aura surrounding Marco Leccio's paper war is cursorily mentioned by S. Acocella, *Controluce: effetti dell'illuminazione artificiale in Pirandello* (Naples, Liguori, 2006), p. 84 n. On a different note, Julie Dashwood has established a parallel between Pirandello's paper wars—especially the one described in 'Berecche e la guerra'—and an episode from De Roberto's *I Vicerè* (J. Dashwood, 'De Roberto and Pirandello: Mapping the War', in *The Risorgimento of Federico De Roberto*, edited by J. Dashwood and M. Ganeri (Bern, Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 111–36).

9 '—But pray, Sir, What was your father doing all *December*, *January*, and *February*?— Why, Madam,—he was all that time afflicted with a *Sciatica*' (*Tristram Shandy*, pp. 8–9).

10 'He could not bear parting from Giacomino, and that was the only reason for his suffering; being a soldier just like his son, that's what he wanted; but he could not!'

11 'He started whistling, as he used to do every time a doubt or a thought tormented him: – Fififi… fififi… fififi…'

12 'Spatolino moves his crown of thorns away from his forehead; he has already grown accustomed to it. He scratches where the thorns left their

mark, and resumes whistling with enraptured eyes: — *Fififi*… *fififi*… *fififi*…'

13 'He told me that he had come to the conclusion that I was a complete child myself, altogether a child; that it was only in face and figure that I was like a grown-up person, but that in development, in soul, in character, and perhaps in intelligence, I was not grown up, and that so I should remain, if I lived to be sixty'; 'I'm twenty-seven, but I know that I'm like a child' (F. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by Constance Garnett, Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, pp. 67 and 517.

14 '"I beg you to tell me at once, without moving from that place; is it true that this unhappy cripple—here she is, here, look at her—is it true that she is... your lawful wife?" […]. "Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch attached no sort of significance to the matter himself, and, besides, there are incidents of which it is difficult for a man to make up his mind to give an explanation himself. […] Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch was leading at that time in Petersburg a life, so to say, of mockery. […] There was a great deal of laughter about it. It ended in Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch's making provision for her when he had to come here, and I believe he arranged to pay a considerable sum, three hundred roubles a year, if not more, as a pension for her. In short it was all a caprice, a fancy of a man prematurely weary on his side"' (Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. by Constance Garnett, London, Heinemann, 1965, pp. 168–69). The similarity between

Perazzetti's and Stavrogin's weddings has already been noticed in E. De Michelis, 'Dostoevskij nella letteratura italiana', *Lettere italiane*, 2 (1972), 177–201 (p. 188).

15 '"I was" he said, while observing his fingernails as usual, "I was, dear friends, in one of those moments (which are, alas!, only too frequent) when Reason (unfortunately I still have some), being sure of having reached the *Absolute* that we keep searching in life, without even noticing…" "I don't | I don't | I don't", we interrupted him simultaneously. "I said *without even noticing*, you idiots!"'

16 See H. Etchegoyen, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique* (London, Karnac, 2005), pp. 563–65.

17 Dostoevsky, 'The Crocodile', in *An Honest Thief and Other Stories*, trans. by Constance Garnett, Rockville, Wildside Press, 2008 [henceforth referred to in text as 'The Crocodile'], pp. 174–76.

18 'The lawyer then explained to him that there were two cases. On the one hand, he, Don Lollò, was obliged to release the prisoner at once so as not to be liable to the charge of "illegal confinement"; on the other hand, the tinker was answerable for the damage he was causing through his lack of professionalism and his carelessness'. Translation taken from Pirandello, *Eleven Short Stories*, trans. by S. Appelbaum (New York, Dover, 1994), p. 105.

19 Indeed, as underlined by Gioanola, Pirandello's ultimate alternative to social conventions seems to be an ambiguous state of *non-vita*, rather than *la vita*: 'alternativa alle "forme" non è la vita, ma la non-vita' (Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia*, p. 46).